

Early Syriac Legal Documents in Context: epigraphic, linguistic and literary”

John Healey, University of Manchester

The paper will seek to reflect on the methodological implications of the fact that some of the Middle Aramaic dialects are known only from epigraphy, while others are known also from legal documents and literary texts. Some have a corresponding contemporary or later literature and others have none.

The early Syriac legal documents provide a starting-point for the consideration of the case of Syriac, represented in epigraphy on stone and mosaic, in legal documents and in an extensive later Christian literature. The early inscriptions on stone are read in the implicit context of the later Classical Syriac literature. In the contrasting Palmyrene and Nabataean cases, there is no such directly linked literature. A different methodology is involved and appeal has to be made to more remote sources.

The way that we read Syriac epigraphy in the Classical Syriac context leads to difficulties in understanding or imagining the actual linguistic reality of Edessa in the first centuries CE and in making sense of the comparison with other Aramaic dialects of the time. The situation also raises questions about the nature of the transition from epigraphic to literary language and the extent to which the vernacular form of the language can be detected at any particular period.